**How can you stop teenagers from drinking and smoking? Just keep them happy... then they won't need alcohol to try to feel less anxious, study finds**

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Keeping teenagers happy could be the secret to stopping them from taking up drinking and smoking.

The least happy schoolchildren are almost twice as likely to take up alcohol and cigarettes, a study by University College [**London**](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/london/index.html)has found.

But those who are content with their family, friendships and life have 25 per cent lower odds of trying them before the age of 16.

Researchers say this is because children, like adults, have learned to associate alcohol with feeling joyful and less anxious.

The study of 1,729 children aged 10 to 15 clearly suggests those who are happy already don’t need the extra help, with a less than 10 per cent chance of being regular drinkers or smokers.

Lead author Dr Noriko Cable, from the UCL Institute of Epidemiology and Health, said: ‘Positive alcohol expectancy works if the person is using alcohol to ease their feelings of emotional inadequacy.

‘Based on that we think children feeling happy in all aspects of life, with friends, school and home, may not have a reason to drink. They don’t need a substance to compensate for a lack of emotional wellbeing. The same principle applies to smoking.’

The rates of smoking, drinking and teenage pregnancy are falling among British schoolchildren, in a phenomenon blamed partly on the fact that they are spending less time in groups and more in front of social media.

However researchers wanted to know if happiness and awareness of the risks influenced their behaviour.

The study is based on data from the UK Longitudinal Household Study, where youngsters were asked to rate their happiness related to school performance, looks, family, friends, school and life in general.

The researchers found the happiest had a 10.8 per cent chance of having tried alcohol and cigarettes. The odds were almost doubled for the least happy however, whose chances were 21.5 per cent.

Children were judged to have tried, or ‘initiated’ drinking and smoking if, in the first round of the survey they had not done so, only to say they had when asked again a year later.

They were classed as ‘persistent’ users if they were smoking and drinking at both time points, and persistent non-users if they were not at either.

The UK study found almost 70 per cent of 10 to 15-year-olds did not use alcohol and cigarettes, with 13 per cent persistent users.

The happiest children had a 74.4 per cent chance of being non-drinkers and smokers, compared to 43.7 per cent of the least happy.

The study, published in the journal BMC Public Health, also found making them aware of the risks could stop them from risking their health.

Those that defined themselves as persistent non-users scored highest on harm awareness and happiness tests compared to the rest of the groups. However having supportive friends did not appear to affect their behaviour.

Dr Cable said: ‘Because the information used in this study is self-reported, the findings should be interpreted with caution, but they do suggest that making adolescents aware of alcohol and smoking related harm can be helpful in preventing them from engaging in risky health behaviours.’

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